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# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## FICTIONAL FORMS

WITHOUT vision, it has been said, man accomplishes little. This may be taken to mean that every successful undertaking—unless it be the result of pure accident—is the realization or the materialization of a mental image.

It is so, for example, in the erection of a building. Be it a splendid edifice or a log hut, the structure is at first but a thought form. In the mind of the architect the broad outlines of the building take general shape, become more definite, then are transferred to paper. There they are modified until it is known beyond question what materials will be needed, and in what combinations and proportions, to produce the intended result. Not only the architect, but those to whom he shows his specifications may see in advance what the building is to be.

The construction of a chair or table could not be accomplished without vision. The more elaborate and perfect the result, the more specific must have been the plan in the artisan's mind. Even the crudest piece of furniture could not be successfully constructed without a general idea in the builder's mind of the result he wished to achieve.

The importance of vision is, in fact, universal. A successful Red Cross drive could not be handled without it. A war could not be waged to victory unless the general in charge of armies possessed the power of seeing in advance the results he hoped to bring about by troop movements. Napoleon, as Emerson tells us, "won his battles in his head, before he won them on the field."

A picture could not be painted without it. The vision in a sculptor's mind serves as a mold into which he fits the plastic clay with his fingers and tools.

Clearness and breadth of vision—ability to see results not yet realized—mark the great statesman, soldier, manufacturer, merchant, salesman, dramatist, inventor, artist, writer. Seeing the result—and seeing it as it should be—reduces the matter of bringing

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it about to secondary importance. Effort and persistence will accomplish this in time. Many steps lie between the vision of the architect and the completed edifice, but these, after all, are steps that anyone can take. It requires the one man in a thousand to supply the initial plan.

Also, it has been pointed out—though this is somewhat aside from the discussion—the really enduring thing is the architect's plan. Compared with it, the resultant building of steel, stone and mortar is an evanescent bubble. It will pass away, but the plan may be perpetuated in another building thousands of years hence with a foundation planted upon its ruins.

The difference between the experienced writer and the novice is largely a difference between their visioning powers. This applies to their vision of life as a whole, and to their conception of men, things, and events; but for this discussion the application will be limited to their perception of literary forms.

The experienced story-writer has a clear mental image of a piece of fiction in the abstract. It is a pattern, as it were, to which he fits his mental conceptions. The novice usually lacks such a mental pattern. His selection of material is largely a matter of accident. He might choose the right elements and arrange them in just the right way to make a good short-story or novel; but he is more likely to select the wrong materials and to fit them together unsatisfactorily. In the latter event, the result in his story is similar to what would happen if a child should pick up miscellaneous pieces of wood and try to fit them together into a chair.

As a writer progresses, he makes fewer failures, because his mental image of the way the completed story should appear grows more definite with experience. Ideas that formerly would have appealed to him are rejected, because they do not fit his mental pattern. In other words, according to his judgment, they would not make good story material.

It should not be understood that the picture in an accomplished story-writer's mind is a rigid thing that permits of only one kind of story, developed in a specific way. The pattern is very elastic. It grows in elasticity with the development of the author's mind, and many variations are permissible. For example, while the pattern for a short-story reveals the same general principles that are found in the pattern for a novel, material differences may be noted—just as they would be noted between a pistol and an automatic rifle.

The pattern does not specify, "The hero must propose to the heroine at a point five-sixths of the way through," or "A new character must be introduced every 327 words." But it does command the author to introduce suspense, to define his characters so that they may be visualized by the reader, and to build toward a climax.

It fact, it defines the quality as well as the type of materials that shall be used—for example, that the introduction must arouse interest and that the climax must have strength in proportion to the length of the tale.

When the writer has acquired a mental image of what a story should contain, he instinctively applies that image, as a pattern of measurement, to each idea that occurs to him.

His mental processes may be somewhat as follows: "No; the idea does not measure up to story requirements. It has action possibilities, but there is no climax. Should the story be written, it would become tame and commonplace just at the point where it should be tense and dramatic. Also, my mental pattern of a fictional narrative says that there should be conflict. This idea contains no element of conflict."

These shortcomings may not, however, debar the idea from consideration. By casting about, introducing new characters or incidents, and otherwise altering his original conception, the ingenious writer may devise a means of providing that which was lacking at first. He may inject complications which result in a conflict of opposit forces and produce a dramatic climax.

Suppose that he succeeds in remedying the defects which his first comparison of the concrete story idea with his mental pattern made evident. Again he compares it with the pattern, and this time he takes note of new shortcomings. "My rough draft," he observes, "is structurally good, but it lacks the variety which I find necessary in a salable yarn. The pattern calls for a proportion of dialogue and direct scenes. I have employed no dialogue; my scenes are all indirect—hence I know they will not be interesting to the reader."

So he revises the story to make it conform to the standard, and continues the process of mental comparison and consequent revision until the completed story fits the pattern. Then, if it is a good, practical pattern, the story is ready to stand the test of public scrutiny.

The possession of a good mental pattern may not help its owner to write more easily than another who lacks it, but it provides him with a tremendous advantage in that he knows what to work toward. It is the same advantage that a cabinetmaker equipped with the working drawings for making a certain piece of furniture possesses over an equally good workman who lacks them. Handling their tools with equal skill, the first would hew and cut his timber with assurance, according to the measurements given on the blue prints, while the second would be forced to experiment uncertainly, and doubtless would botch the job.

The author's mental concept of what a finished story should be is something that has grown up within him. It is the resultant of

his experience, his reading, and of advice that he has received, all modified by his personal inclinations. It cannot be wholly transplanted from one mind to another; it can only be conveyed in a general way by means of advice and suggestion. But there are certain concepts that may be called fundamental. After mastering them, a student will have a fairly definite image of what a piece of fiction should be. He will know with a certain specificness what is essential for constructing his stories—just as he knows that in building a house there must be a foundation, walls, a roof, doors, windows, plumbing, etc. And, knowing these essentials, it will be almost inexcusable in him to go far wrong.

Of course, since he is to be a specialist in his craft, his knowledge should be as detailed as possible. For the ordinary individual it may suffice to know that a room should have a door, but the architect must know where to place it, of what size and materials to make it, and how to distribute the wall timbers in providing for it. There are no exact rules to be followed in planning that particular room, but there are *principles* from which the rule suited to the occasion is to be worked out. Similarly, although there is no rule which prescribes just where the climax must be introduced in a particular piece of fiction, and what kind of a climax it shall be, there are principles which the author must follow in order to reach the proper result.

Let us attempt to sketch the mental image that an experienced story-writer consciously or unconsciously follows as a pattern when he undertakes to write a piece of fiction.

W. E. H.

(This discussion—illustrated by diagrams, analyses of published fiction and other aids to a correct visioning of story forms in the abstract—will be continued in the next issue of *The Student-Writer*.)

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## PLOT ANALYSIS THROUGH CLASSIFICATION

BY FREDERICK DYER ANDERSON

(Concluded. This article began in March)

There is space for a second illustration. Our lead this time shall be a woman, and we will see what can be done with the theme of a "past." Instead of the woman hiding the facts until it is safe to disclose them and obtaining her husband's forgiveness, let's make it all a mistake that she had a past. Another complication might be also added—a lie concerning present facts. This might have to do with family. The hero sets out to discover the long-lost daughter of his friend; he finds a woman who apparently is the daughter and she lets the deception go on in her hope of winning him. Suppose that the real daughter had a "past," and that it is this the heroine attempts to hide. If it comes to light she will lose her lover (for of course the hero has fallen in love with her), and on the other hand, if she succeeds in hiding it he may nevertheless discover that she is not the lost daughter and therefore spurn her. Or if the past does come to light and she attempts to explain it away by disclosing her identity she must acknowledge the lie she has been practicing and thereby lose him. The real daughter must be removed then, but first it is necessary that the girls be friends and about the same age. They are workers, say, in a department store of a big city. The real daughter leaves under such circumstances that the heroine supposes she is dead. The hero in his search reaches the flat, finds the heroine, supposes she is the real daughter, and the heroine, in desperation, to escape the unwelcome attentions of a man of the underworld consents to the lie. From this point on the play writes itself. Here is the story as worked out:

## THE HEART'S LADDER.

Madge Haynes and Rose Fowler run away to the city and secure employment. They are inseparable friends. Rose takes up with Durant, as the only way out of the hopelessness of existing on a department-store wage.

Durant deserts her, and Rose, broken-hearted, follows him to another city, saying to Madge that if anything ever happens to her, whatever it hers shall be Madge's. No word is received from Rose, but Durant returns and tries to substitute Madge in her place.

Gerald Birney, a young clubman, is commissioned by his older friend, Ralph Cowden, on his deathbed to seek out the daughter of his youth (who is really Rose) and atone for his wrong in deserting his wife and young child. Birney traces Rose to her home town and from there to the city and calls at her apartment. A lying landlady admits him, first, however, having advised Madge that a "swell" is looking for Rose and that Madge had better take whatever good things are coming Rose's way, and incidentally get money for back rent. Birney, supposing that he has found Rose, calls Madge Rose, and Madge, seeing in this an escape from Durant's attentions and from her hopeless situation, acquiesces in the

mistake. Love comes and Birney and Madge are about to be married. Her home-town lover, John Moore, continues to urge Madge to return, but she refuses and tells him to write no further. Madge lives in continual fear lest Birney discover the truth. He fell in love with her supposing her to be Rose, the daughter of his old friend. On the other hand, for him to learn that Rose had gone the easiest way would be equally disastrous. Durant finds Madge and urges her to leave town with him. Birney drives up while Durant is with her. Madge sees Birney coming and gets Durant away by telling him it is a friend of Rose's. He lingers, however, in the hallway and overhears the scene between Moore, Madge and Birney, for Moore comes in shortly. Madge's identity is forthwith disclosed, and Durant, who has been listening, comes in and, thinking to clear both Moore and Birney out of the way, says she is Rose Fowler, and that he ought to know for she had been and was then accepting his attentions. The truth comes out and in spite of these disclosures Birney continues to love Madge for herself, being brought back to her side partly by the puritanical small-town attitude toward her exhibited by Moore.

## HOW ONE CRITICISM PAID

Mabel Wagnalls Asserts That Her Masterpiece, "The Rosebush of a Thousand Years," Was Started Toward Fame Through The Student-Writer.

**T**HE Student-Writer's department of literary criticism has helped many well-known writers to success. The experience of Mabel Wagnalls and her now famous production, "The Rosebush of a Thousand Years," is well to the point.

The story first appeared in magazine form, was republished, and finally was "double-starred" in E. J. O'Brien's "Best Short Stories of 1916." The moving picture rights were sought by four firms and secured by the Metro Pictures company for Madame Nazimova. With comparatively few changes, the tale was adapted into the photoplay, "Revelation," a play that has called forth unusual commendation from the critics. Finally it was elaborated and republished as a novel under the original title by the Funk & Wagnalls company.

"The Rosebush of a Thousand Years" was sent to The Student-Writer criticism bureau and revised according to instructions, before an attempt was made by the author to find a publisher. Concerning the later developments, Mrs. Wagnalls wrote to the editor as follows:

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March 2nd, 1917.

My dear Mr. Hawkins:

It may interest you to know that I profited by your criticism of my "Rosebush" story to such an extent that it has made something of a record. Here is its history:

I cut the thing squarely in two, upon your advice, then gave it to an agent. He sold it to Snappy Stories. They published it at once (October 18th). To my great astonishment it was reprinted in Current Opinion in December. Four days later I received a request for the moving picture rights, and a week later a similar request from another firm. I have now sold the rights for a sum very much in excess of that received for the short-story rights, and have also sold (on the strength of this) the movie rights to my novel about Mme. de Pompadour. "The Rosebush of a Thousand Years" has also been listed in O'Brien's "Best Short Stories of 1916."

Furthermore, I have been offered a position as consulting scenario writer, and have been asked for more of my own screen stories. The magazines also have asked for more of my work.

I want you to know that I thoroughly appreciate the careful and lengthy suggestions you made about my queer little story, "Adrift on the Centuries." Believe me,

Very cordially yours,

(Mrs.) MABEL WAGNALLS.

Under date of April 14, 1919, Mrs. Wagnalls commented further:

My dear Mr. Hawkins:

You probably are as much surprised as I am at the developments of my "Rosebush" story. Its progress seems continuous. Just this morning I had a letter from a minister—unknown to me—who used the book as a subject for his sermon on March 20th in one of the large New York churches.

I have occasionally given your name to other writers and trust they have patronized you. I shall be glad to turn to you myself when in a dilemma.

Very cordially yours,

MABEL WAGNALLS.

#### APPLYING THE STUDENT-WRITER TO ENGLISH CLASSES.

Charles H. Gray, professor of English in Tufts College, Massachusetts, makes the following interesting comments upon the last issue of The Student-Writer:

I have just finished your article, 'Reading for Writers,' in the March number of The Student-Writer. It is so excellent, in my judgment, that I wish to thank you and to compliment you. I am sure that it will do good for writers. It has done me good as a teacher. I talked to my students this morning about the reading of Shakespeare, 'Romeo and Juliet' in particular, and made the point that reading of this kind sinks into the mind, changing its texture, enriching it, and may be called forth again, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, to strengthen one's own ideas derived from other sources, especially experience. What you write about innate receptivity and reading strikes me as correct and well presented. As to reading for technique, I would use that if I were teaching advanced composition. On the whole, I consider The Student-Writer a valuable sheet.

I wish you success in your work and believe that it deserves success.

Yours sincerely,

CHARLES H. GRAY.

Arthur S. Hoffman, editor of Adventure Magazine, writes that the Ridgway Company, publishers of Everybody's and Adventure, is now open to manuscripts for a new monthly magazine to appear in the near future. The new publication is based on the fact that lovers of really first-class fiction have few opportunities in this country to find that grade of fiction assembled in considerable quantity under a single cover. The new magazine will be centered upon meeting that need. Its slogan is the best stories by the best-known writers, the newest writers, or any other writers who can produce the best stories. Many of the usual magazine conventions will be disregarded where they involve the rejection of really good material. Short stories of any length will be used. Novelettes, novels and serials up to 100,000 words. Poems in limited number. All manuscripts should be addressed to William Ives Washburn, Jr., literary editor, The Ridgway Company, Spring and Macdougall, New York. Arthur S. Hoffman of Adventure is in charge as editor.

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### FOLLOWING IS A LETTER GIVING ONE WRITER'S OPINION OF THIS BOOK

I spent a whole day in the New York City Public Library looking over books on the Short Story and allied or kindred subjects. After examining over fifty books I decided I needed a copy of "Helps for Student-Writers." This was the only book that I considered would be of direct value in my work.

J. J. M.

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